Jafta Masemola's Master Key

Experimental Notes on Azanian Aesthetic Theory

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Abstract: Jafta Kgalabi Masemola is the longest serving (1963–1989) anti-apartheid political prisoner in South Africa's notorious Robben Island. Although Masemola is well known in the struggle narratives, not much has been written about him and his practices as a political organiser beyond biographical and anecdotal narratives. This article considers, with a certain degree of detail, an even more unthought aspect of Masemola's life, his creative productions; in particular, the aesthetic logic that underwrites the master key that he cloned from a bar of soap while jailed in Robben Island. Looking from the vantage point of aesthetic and critical discourse, the article attempts to open up new vistas and interests in Azanian cultural praxis.

Keywords: black aesthetics, Azania, Jafta Masemola, master key, Robben Island, smuggling

Towards the end of apartheid, many art practitioners, scholars, and activists were preoccupied with variations of the question, 'what defines South African expressions?' From participants in the historic 1987 Amsterdam conference, *Culture in Another South Africa* (1989) to the 1990 Zabalaza Festival in London (1993) to the early 1990s controversial remarks on culture made by constitutional judge Albie Sachs, this question persists. In fact, it was particularly Sachs's paper, which was first presented in Stockholm, 1989, in an in-house African National Congress (ANC) meeting, and then in a seminar in Lusaka where it gained more attention, that further emboldened the preparations on the new national culture as an

index of the democratic dispensation. 'We South Africans', Sachs argued, 'fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. . . . But we don't know who we ourselves are' (1990: 146). For Sachs, this problem of national self-knowing was not just predicated on knowing where 'we' are, geographically, temporally, and even socio-politically but also who 'we' are and what 'we' ought to be. According to Sachs, this much anticipated national identity and culture ought to reflect and constitute a new cultural imaginary freed from the 'multiple ghettos of apartheid imagining' (1990:19). And all this was contingent, he insisted, on putting to use the wisdom inherited from the Freedom Charter, that promised a non-racial constitutional democracy 'with an intellectual reach into the future' (1990: 186–187). 'If we wish to break down the habits of thinking in racial categories and to encourage the principles of non-racial democracy, we must produce a constitution that contemplates the rights of all citizens of our country, not just of a section, however large and however abused in the past it may have been' (Sachs 1990: 187). Interestingly, responses to Sachs's paper conveniently entitled, 'Preparing Ourselves to Freedom', despite their critical contestations on its main thesis, that is, constructing a post-apartheid cultural imaginary beyond the protest idiom, either took for granted or acquiesced to its more stringent proposition on what South Africa is or ought to be, with perhaps the exception of visual artist and poet Pitika Ntuli's sceptical, if not ambivalent, response (1993: 72–73):

Don't we know what South Africa is? . . . we know who we are, and what South Africa is. It is a society desperately trying to pull itself out of a nightmare turned lifemare, a society plagued by organic crisis after crisis utilizing conjectural devices to live from day to day, hand to mouth.

Implicit in Ntuli's articulation is a critical remark on the historical origin and evolvment of the South African polity, as a violent symbolic and political construct. Though Ntuli himself does not, textually, offer an alternative position to the South African ideology, it will not be presumptuous of me to surmise that this anonymised conception of a 'we' and its attendant cultural expression could only be the Azanian option. In the following pages, I am suggesting that beneath the South African cultural expression

lies – repressed – an insurgent cultural praxis of the Azanian tradition embodied in, amongst many, the political activities of Jafta Kgalabi Masemola. I take Masemola’s well-known interventions of forging prison master keys while incarcerated at Robben Island as an instantiation of this insurgent praxis as well as a generative place upon which to begin experimental notes on Azanian theory and philosophy of art. Elsewhere I have called this similar practice *Bolekaja Aesthetics* (2020: 252), by which I was attempting to acknowledge and characterise an insurrectionary cultural tendency within black revolutionary praxis, that has been and remains marginalised, or even maligned, in the (art) historical field. This cultural tendency not only seeks to rupture prevailing logics of taste and judgment that subtend racist aesthetic categories, what philosopher Sylvia Wynter calls a deciphering practice, but also places emphasis on the potentiality of the creative act as a change agent, that is, not secondary to any other form of emancipatory activities. This perspective differs from the view that ‘art cannot overthrow a government, but it can inspire change’ (Mnye 2009: 27). Like literary critic Julian Mayfield who sets apart his version of Black Aesthetics, the Azanian formulation of this tendency is about ‘the business of making a revolution, for we tried everything else’ (1972: 31). But before we get to Masemola’s key, I want to spend time thinking of the notion of South Africa vis-a-vis Azania.

Recent public commentaries on the subject of the South African polity have pointed to its particularly colonial formation and relation to indigenous populations. That is, South Africa not only as a geographical designation without a proper name as it is commonly caricatured but as a particularly settler colony. Referring to post-1994 South Africa as settler-colonial seeks to underscore a problem beyond unfulfilled promises. In other words, to temporarily suspend, say, concerns over the economic and institutional exclusion, on which we, out of newfound wokeness, tend to always begin our critiques but deliberately interrogate the ethical tenability of the South African polity and its pretensions to include those it ‘previously’ excluded in its establishment. Here the emphasis on previousness seeks to underscore the soporific effect of the temporal assigning of pastness or post as designating a newness or arrival into a kind of differentiable order. The paradox of an ‘inclusive exclusion’, which upholds the originary structure of the South African polity,

is a formulation from Agamben's reading of bare life. Agamben writes that 'bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion' (1995: 11). The post-1994 settlement was not, in any substantive way, meant to reverse the historical injustice but simply to extend civil liberties to the excluded *à la* Sachs. For critical legal theorist Anthony Farley, inclusion of that sort strives to 'perfect' the oppressive structure and equally the oppressed people's fight for 'equal rights produce a home for the future good will' of their oppressors (2004: 227). Thus, the discourse of inclusion which the post-apartheid dispensation has interpreted as synonymous with freedom is not just an elaborated ruse but one that is capaciously reproduced across public and private spheres.

Minister of Arts and Culture Nathi Mthethwa's 2017 controversial remarks, made in a closed meeting, that South Africa considers changing its name – which according to him signified mere 'geographical reference' – to Azania,¹ sparked a national but relatively short-lived debacle. Mthethwa had seen this intervention as continuous with the government's ongoing attempt to *Africanize* the post-apartheid South African landscape. But the minister's orientation towards Azania could not be more a surprising icing on the cake. What prompted this newfound penchant for Azania in the Congress movement and its defecting groups, when before it was greeted with unflinching intolerance?² The fingering of black radical nationalism as the force that prevailed over the recent student protests, which called for the falling and decolonisation of the colonial infrastructure and its props, might have sublimely conjured this code switching. The about-turn to decolonisation as the ruling party's political motif is therefore suspect in the face of its historical stance and its ideological praxis. The decolonisation paradigm, Ramose argues, is inconsistent with and contrary to the democratic paradigm's inclination to extinguish the past and its continuing transgressions in the present. He writes, 'The former speaks to the restoration of title to territory and sovereignty over it. It includes the exigency of restitution. It would bring the conqueror to renounce in principle and expressly title to South African territory and sovereignty over it' (Ramose 2004b: 487). However, the recursive epistemic erasure or obfuscation of radical concepts, such as Azania or decolonisation, has proliferated quite exponentially not only within

the ruling party's lexicon but also amongst whites who also previously rejected their critical disposition. Consider for example how 'fallism' has recently become an elastic term variously used by reactionary groupings led by 'captains of industry' in such campaigns as #ZumaMustFall, as 'a device to protect and perpetuate the privileges acquired through conquest in the unjust wars of colonization' (Ramose 2004a: 462). This appropriative impulse is evident not only in the juridical and political strength of the neocolonial system but also in the interpellative power of its discursive practices, as constitutive of what historian Hosea Jaffe might call the colonial 'modes' of production (1994: 5). The repudiation of previously heretic concepts is not enough, it seems; their utility is to ensure the reconfiguration or redirection of their purpose. Ironically – if it is even an irony – David Dube opens his book *The Rise of Azania: The Fall of South Africa* (1983) by recounting how, in 1978, the apartheid regime too had considered changing South Africa to Azania, as a deligitimising plan. While it might appear that to both popular objections and performative recourse to Azania, treat it as mere discursive trope alone, we can arguably say that this perennial rush to de-substantiate the name is indicative of a certain political nervousness that prods something beyond its nominal status. Let us hear from Rev. George Wauchope (2013):

There often exists an undeclared state of war among people involved in the struggle for liberation as between those who support and those who are against the use of the name Azania as an alternative name for a liberated South Africa. This is because the debate concerns much more than a name: It involves everything that we are fighting for: it concerns the very nature of the society we seek to build.

What is it we are fighting for? Who constitutes the 'we' of this fight? Why is Azania inseparable from this fight? According to Motsoko Phoko, when the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) decided to rename South Africa to Azania in their covertly organised conference in 1964 (1972: 107):

The settler troops were mobilized when news of the new name leaked out for it was feared that the renaming of the country was a prelude to a planned uprising . . . But many Africans felt that renaming of South Africa was in keeping with the African revolution for it meant

'Blackman's country'. South Africa was a name associated with forces of imperialism.

For Dube, 'South Africa was not only a creation of white settlers and their colonial backers, but South Africa was never meant for the blackman' (1983: 3). But 'Azania' he contends, 'is not just a name given to 'South Africa' by the Sobukwes and Steve Bikos. Azania distinguishes the mentally liberated Blacks from mentally colonized Blacks' (4). Consequently, South Africa and Azania are not just dissimilar imaginaries; they are also antagonistically related to each other. They analogise the antagonistic relation whites have with blacks. The former is oppositional not only to the latter but also to its possibility condition. This has led to a simultaneous condemnation and the pervasive obfuscation of the latter. Among whites especially, Azania denotes the threat of the black Armageddon which had long fuelled white imaginations; 'a black and mischievous background against which the civilized and semi-civilized perform(ed) their parts' as Evelyn Waugh once characterised Azania (1995: 77). Alternatively, it denotes a 'black utopia' once characteristic of all liberation movements, which today has been made defunct by the discourse of Rainbow nationalism. The heightened interests in the historical, etymological, and demythologised perspectives of the term Azania stimulates psychic and political anxiety. And as a cultural and iconological referent, Azania tends to be recuperated in cultural discourse as totalitarian if not an anachronistic myth uncritically posited as a singular tendency of black oppositional thought.³ Whatever the case, the conclusion becomes 'because Azania is a kind of South Africa . . . it's also like a myth, like Atlantis' (Smigiel 2014: 152). This naturalises South Africa not only as a polity but also as a symbolic place-name, 'the ground which it [Azania] was born' (ibid.). And political naturalisation, according to political theorist Andreas Kalyvas, is 'characterized by civic privatism, depoliticization, and passivity and carried out by political elites, professional bureaucrats, and social technicians' (2008: 6). Settler colonial naturalisation requires the duplication of efforts as a means of attaining the illusion of permanency. This is as true for the coloniser as it is for those who organise against oppression. This brings us to Masemola's struggle and his persistently creative imagination for what it means to be free.

The Insurgency of Jafta Kgalabi Masemola

Together with his conspirators, Sedick Isaack and Anthony Suze, working as blacksmiths in Robben Island's masonry workshop, Masemola had impressed the prison's master key on a bar of soap to construct what his fellow inmate Magomola called his '*skelm* key'. In 1963, Masemola was charged, together with sixteen others, including his students, with conspiracy to commit sabotage and smuggling individuals out of the country for military training. He would subsequently be sentenced to life imprisonment in Robben Island. Born Jafta Kgalabi Masemola in Bon Accord outside of Pretoria on 12 December 1931, and the last of twelve children, Masemola's family moved around the townships of Pretoria and finally settled in Atteridgeville where he did his primary and secondary schooling. An orphan at an early age, he became his older siblings' responsibility, primarily his sister Jaftalina Moyo. Despite the odds, Jafta would graduate with a teacher's diploma and soon thereafter start teaching at a local primary school. It is alleged that, in 1958, during this early stage in his teaching period, Masemola encountered his political Damascus and joined the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL).

However, Masemola's stint in the ANCYL was rather brief, as he in the same year would walk out of the congress movement together with a group of Africanists, led by Mangaliso Sobukwe, to form the PAC. The Africanists walked out of the ANC in 1958 over a disagreement with the 1955 adoption of the Freedom Charter – allegedly drafted by white communists and liberals (Mngxitama 2006: 183) – disputing the evisceration of conqueror versus conquered dynamic expressed in the Charter's opening line: 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and White'. In the following years, the PAC would lead what historian Brown Maaba has called the 'war against the state' (2004), starting with its dual 1960 anti-pass campaign in Langa and Sharpeville townships. The campaign would culminate to what we now remember as the Sharpeville massacre, which spontaneously brought about the banning of both the PAC and ANC by the apartheid regime. The resolution of the PAC's militant attitude was not as a result of its banning and arrests (as some might argue) but rather particular to its Africanist disposition, its policy on non-violence notwithstanding. Such

militancy was not just predetermined by its proclivity to armed violence, which became the post-Sharpeville defining feature of radicalism in the ANC.⁴ Instead, a set of dispositions whose genealogy was predicated on the historicity of conquest and thus drew 'inspiration from the heroes of Thaba Bosiu, Isandlwana, Sandile's Kop, Kieskama Hoek and numerous other battlefields where our forefathers fell before the bullets of the foreign invader' (Sobukwe 1978: 36). This historical connection to the wars of expropriation and the antagonism that it foregrounded between white domination and black subjugation could not be mitigated by any conciliatory gesture, more so one which appealed to a multiracialist joint custody over the conquered land. Similarly, with the postures of the Black Consciousness Movement a decade later, the PAC's earlier espousal of non-violence was merely a tactical front not a political conviction.⁵ That the 'PAC underground always intended to attack human targets rather than government buildings or installations' (Maaba 2004: 264), today invocations such as 'one settler one bullet' or even its iterations in the current debacle over 'Land or Death'⁶ retain the psychic anxiety that impulsively curtails any 'race talk' in the guise of retaining a superficial conciliation. The PAC had settled on one issue: 'to declare total war against the demigod of white supremacy' (Sobukwe 1978: 36).

Masemola, also affectionately known as 'Bra Jeff' or 'The Tiger of Azania'⁷ by his comrades and contemporaries, had played a key role in making many Pretoria townships, one of the PAC's strongholds. This growth is attributed to the ANC's general ignorance of Pretoria townships during the bus boycotts of 1957, particularly in relation to its reformism that had also begun to befuddle the angry masses. Sello Mathabatha writes that it was 'the Congress failure to accommodate radical elements within its ranks that led to the Orlando breakaway by the Africanists in 1958, thus leaving a vacuum in Pretoria for the militant PAC to grow' (2004: 306). Therefore, Mathabatha writes (2004: 301):

In both Pretoria and Vaal Triangle, possibly due to the preponderance of secondary schools with boarding facilities., the PAC was dominated by young adults, including the newly employed, school leavers, gangsters, pupils, and students. Pretoria was also distinctive because, even though it was the seat of apartheid, it was the only city in which the PAC enjoyed virtually unopposed African support.

Due to the moralism in black politics of the last century, rarely do we find gangsters or *tsotsis* cast in the narratives of struggle with a semblance of positive, political light. However, for literary critic and novelist Lewis Nkosi, gangsters had a particular and rare appeal that inadvertently exemplified and aspired to the repressed subjectivity of political rebels. According to Nkosi, gangsters ‘reserve for themselves freedom of action which is denied to other law-abiding citizens’ (1975: 58). Also ‘their preparedness to strike back at white society, their bravery and . . . bravado; secretly . . . *tsotsi* acts out the unadmitted dreams of the oppressed majority’ (ibid.). This sense of gallantry needed not be dismissed but reorientated, re-channelled. For the PAC, recruiting gangsters or *tsotsis* into their ranks, in part, can also be attributed to its resolution that the apartheid state had no moral or legal standing to prosecute black people with unjust laws. In other words, the criminalisation of *tsotsis* stemmed not only from their unlawful activities alone but also from a more generalised criminalisation of black people, guilty or otherwise. Thus, side by side with the *tsotsis*, Masemola recruited workers, students, and dropouts into the revolutionary ranks of the PAC. One of his students and co-accused, together with Mark Shinnars, John Nkosi et al. from Attridgeville, now justice Dikgang Moseneke, writes:

Despite his calling as a teacher, he did not address meetings or tutor the youth in Africanist thinking. He headed a highly shielded task team called the ‘bomb squad’. Their mission was discreet and dangerous. They stole hand-grenades and bombs stored at an army depot near a shooting range in Phelindaba. (2016: 64)

Coincidentally, this plan was intercepted by the police on the eve of its occurrence due to alleged infiltration by their informants. We are told they had chosen this particular depot to cause enough spectacle that would redirect the police’s attention, thereby ‘allowing cadres to attack whites in the suburbs’ (Mathabatha 2004: 317). It is disturbing that historian Tom Lodge places less emphasis on the latter point but on how infiltration of the Pretoria PAC groups showed how they were not protecting themselves from informers because ‘they didn’t kill them’ (1985: 246). Though true that informers existed, this disconcerting emphasis by Lodge is contradicted by Mathabatha when he points to trial records made by

an informant confirming that a group known as twelve disciples associated with Masemola had spent the 'several nights' on the eve of their arrest 'hunting down a detective called Harry with intention of killing him for being an informer' (318). Upon his arrest, Masemola would spend nearly all his adult life in Robben Island. That is, twenty-seven years in prison, until he was released in October 1989, on the eve of the 'talks about talks' – negotiations – upon Nelson Mandela's request. Contrary to the popular view that it was Nelson Mandela who was the longest serving political prisoner in Robben Island, it was Masemola who served twenty-seven years in Robben Island (1963–1989). Mainstream historical accounts have monopolised the ways in which South African history reflects the past – written at times as if it was ANC history – such that it has virtually erased figures like Masemola.⁸ It is alleged that before his release Masemola had a three-hour meeting with Mandela at Victor Verster prison,⁹ a meeting whose contents still remains unknown. However, after being released, Masemola would reject this false magnanimity as 'intended to soften world pressure . . . not so much out of humanitarian consideration'. He died six months later in a suspicious car accident, age fifty-eight.

Robben Island and the Impossible Escape

Close to three decades after his death, we are still to reflect seriously on the political and creative legacy of Jafta Masemola. Much of the anti-apartheid "cultural work" exists more as display material or pedagogic in public institutions.¹⁰ A different set of concerns preoccupy this intervention. What sort of explanatory and revolutionary imaginaries arise when we consider Masemola's master key from the perspective of Azanian political and philosophical thought? Though not completely unknown, where it is taken up the narrative about Masemola's master key always takes the form of a fable, retold in biographic, journalistic, partisan, and reflective accounts. Like a nightly tale narrated in whispers, the backstory to Masemola's key appears only fleetingly in each account with the kind of ephemerality that easily gives it the status of a mythopoetics. At least, that is what I thought before seeing the actual 'master key' when I arrived on Robben Island.

Escape and defiance prefigures the history of the Robben Island, perhaps like all spaces of confinement do. After travelling 7,2 kilometres from the Cape Town harbour on the rough and constantly enraged Atlantic Ocean waters, the ferry arrived on the famous island affectionately known either as *Esiqithini* or Makhanda's Island. As we disembarked from the ferry at Murray's Bay, we immediately encountered a giant welcoming sign on the board stating in English and Afrikaans: 'We Serve with Pride'. The sign flaunts its pride of service with both honorific and cultural ease, something seemingly odd for a punitive site such as the penitentiary. However, in his study 'Bentham's Panopticon: An Incident in the Social History of Architecture', historian Robin Evans makes the point that it was common in eighteenth-century Britain to describe the penitentiary as philanthropic reform and that it was 'this matrix of philanthropic concern that generated the rationale of the prison system' (1982: 24). Even today, we know prisons as 'correctional services' as a progression of the reform agenda. In any event, it is not clear in the sign when or who made the illustration. But according to Charlene Smith, it was built and painted by prisoners (1997: 79). Although less entertained in art historical research, Robben Island had a number of visual artists – the majority of whom have fallen into obscurity – such as Lionel Davis, Geneva Morake, Joe G. Koza, and even Masemola. One of the exhibition displays shows that a programme dedicated to carceral arts at some point became popular amongst prisoners at Robben Island. In fact, in one or two of his scholarly articles, late art critic Colin Richards makes a fleeting mention of finding an overused and exchanged dogeared and heavily underlined copy of Ernst Fisher's *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach*, in the Robben Island files at Mayibuye Centre, which interestingly suggests that art was among the concerns and preoccupation of political prisoners.

Let me return to the welcoming board. The slogan, outrageous as it is, is sandwiched between two illustrations: (1) one of the badge of the prison; and (2) the other of a picture of an arum lily flower. Lilies grow wildly among the island's lush vegetation. The badge on the other side shows a prison emblem with keys running across each other, the Bible, the scales of justice above and below a life-buoy ring. Despite the curious company, the message is clear: 'And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king,

let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment', so reads the book of Ezra. Today, Robben Island is no longer the frightening site of punitive practice but one of South African's tourist destinations and cultural museums. This shift from carcerality to the museum itself has come to mark historical overcoming and national pride. But according to art critic and historian Douglas Crimp, 'the history of museology is a history of all the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogenous system or series' (1983: 49).

I previously mentioned about how dominant historical accounts monopolise histories of struggle; there's no other public institution where this hegemonic discourse plays out more than it does in Robben Island. The centralisation of what sociologist Xolela Mangcu called 'the triumphant chimera of 'reconciliation' [that] has become our cultural export' (quoted in Coombes 2003: 68) has been the vantage point through which we see the history of Robben Island, in which Mandela was its symbolic Moses, and the ruling party its tabernacle. In one homological stroke, the history of the liberation struggle is summarised and narrowed down to what Pheko has described as 'tales intended for political misinformation and mutilation of the history of this Island prison' (2002: 15). In her book, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, Coombes agrees that 'one of the more prosaic hurdles in the struggle over Robben Island was the old bugbear of conflicting interests over the public representation of history once the profit margin is prioritised by a private sector sponsor and the appeal of international revenue takes precedence over local tourism' (2003: 68). Although Coombes herself adopts a semi-partial view in the matter, her intervention, more generally, clearly shows how this homogenous framing of historical memory not only deny variegated participations within those institutions but also, more specifically, tends to crowd out women's experiences in colonial-apartheid prisons. As a result of this foreclosure, political history 'comes perilously close to memory kitsch' (Enwezor 2004: 29) as museological rewriting becomes a mode of quenching the parasitic needs of an itinerant international cultural elite on one side, and a vampiric ideological agenda of the ruling party on the other. Coincidentally, upon visiting the island in early 2019, whilst

preparing for this article, it was not alarming to see how the tour's crescendo was impatiently reached when we arrived at the famous Block B – where Mandela's cell 5 is located. Even though the matters Coombes addresses in her book seemed adequately considered in 2019, one could not shake off the thought that the strategic conclusion, centrality, and time spent around Mandela's Block B circumscribed the demands of that critique. All of a sudden, the whole history of the island which we, as a group, had heard before, paled almost immediately. After meandering through the island and its cell exhibitions, following and listening to the guide's instructions and lessons, it would be our arrival at Block B that truly memorialises such a visit. Everyone took out their cameras and asked to be photographed. Some even cried!

Rather ominously, the heterogenous history told by the various prison guides from the bus to the cells, disappeared or was vicariously condensed into the narrative body of the ANC as the splitting image of 'the triumph of the human spirit'. This 'inverted consciousness of the world' to use Marx expression, mutually satisfies the tourists and the private sector alike. The tourist's visit to Robben Island is in keeping with the iconography of Mandela as the world 'icon on a pedestal belonging to a museum' (West 2006: 13), whilst for business, Mandela's image serves Neoliberal capitalist interests. This symbiotic relation between the corporatisation of memory and what art historian Krista Thompson calls the 'tourist impetus', produces a biased history as 'objective' (2014: 484) in ways that it 'attest[s] to the unyielding production of these images despite . . . outcries' (481). And, despite this narrow association of Robben Island with the ANC, its lesser known history is that it was also 'a leper colony', that is 'the dumping ground for the unwanted, the desperately ill, the blind, the impoverished, the insane and the criminal' (Smith 1997: 15). But for purposes of this article, I will only briefly reflect on the banishment of political undesirables since the mid-1600s and their unrelenting propensity to flee. These captives were not only South African natives; some were also slaves and fugitives captured as far away as Malaysia, India, Indonesia, and even Sri Lanka. When Jan Van Riebeeck of the Dutch East India Company banished the Khoi leader Autshumao (a.k.a. Harry die Strandloper) and his confidantes in 1658, this single act opened up a possibility for centuries of forced exile of every rebel and

leader who dared confront the invading Europeans. Leaders like David Stuurman of the Khoi, Maqoma of the amaXhosa, and Langalibalele of the Amahlubi, were some of the prisoners of the unjust wars of colonial conquest, who were banished to the island. The failed escape of the Xhosa prophet Makhanda (for whom the island is unofficially named) that led to his drowning in August 1820, is by far the most widely known story about escapees of the time. As historian Julia C. Wells in her book, *Rebellion and Uproar* argues, though it was not the first time Makhanda had tried to escape and failed (2007: 13), his exit led to a dramatic coup d'état. However, Wells also notes something rather powerful about the impact of Makhanda's escape to liberation struggle prisoners.

Every escape from prison reflects a spirit of determined defiance against the restrictive authorities and has political overtones. The great escape of 1820, however, shows many indications of a strong underlying, motivating agenda. All those who took part had a direct experience of a world free of European controls. They were the living embodiment of a world in which Xhosa and Khoisan acted together, a world that offered refuge to all the victims of oppressive labour conditions, whether slaves, Europeans or Khoisan servants. All these elements echoed in the cooperation of the escapees, regardless of background, to make something impossible happen. (2007: 38)

The appellations 'Makhanda University' (Coombes 2003: 58), 'Sobukwe University' (Pheko 2002: 14) or even after Autshumao (Desai 2019) have become common references to Robben Island. Coombes argues that the 'insistence on this appellation is also perhaps an indication of the bitterness that erupted over what many in the PAC regarded as the ANC leadership's wilful amnesia over non-ANC initiated activism in the liberation struggle' (2003: 58). However, Coombes's assessment is not so much wrong as it is late, since these unofficial appellations to Robben Island as 'Makhanda University' were already ongoing in the 1970s (Maharaj 2001: ix). They, however, did not go without resistance, as Nelson Mandela's 1970s famous letter to the Black Consciousness Movement proves (Mandela 2001: 51). In other words, prior to the amnesia, non-ANC initiated activities were initially refused, then repressed, only to be recalibrated as if part of the political lexicon of the broader Congress culture. Masemola understood prison life differently, it seems – that is, as political repression that results from suppressing

the ultimate demand: returning of the land to the colonised. Speaking in a public meeting in Port Elizabeth soon after he was released, Masemola said:

When we were arrested in 1963, that was the question: the land question. *Sasifuna umhlaba wethu!* That is another tactic from the usurper to dissuade you from the course. Thousands upon thousands of Africans are thrown into jail, daily. That is a form of intimidation. The oppressor hopes by using such tactics you will eventually bow down on their knees before them and beg for mercy.¹¹

For Masemola, South Africa was de facto a prison for the African subject and being black under settler colonial and apartheid rule meant existentially living on borrowed time. To paraphrase political theorist Michael Hardt (1997: 65), “doing time” in Robben Island was not qualitatively different from “doing time” outside, in settler-colonial South Africa, but continuous with the temporality of the colonial domination. One of the things noted by many who knew Jafta Masemola was his proclivity to make the ‘impossible happen’, or suffer the consequences of being in solitary confinement or *khulukhuts*. His infamous victories in jail, often by way of one-man protests and hunger strikes, positioned his own body as a weapon of resistance against the system as a whole. In other words, regardless of whether this carcerality was inside or outside penal facilities, Masemola’s temperament against the settler-colonial society remained unflinching, perennial failure notwithstanding. The fear for loss of life and other forms of tactical retreats from revolutionaries’ praxis, seemingly did not discourage him. Amongst the narratives mentioning Masemola, there is always an invocation about a sculpture of a ‘fantastic figure’ sometimes referred to as Autshumao and at other times, Nxele. The specificity of who it ought to be does not really matter. One of the most illustrious descriptions come from the ANC inmates like Nelson Mandela.¹² Mandela refers to Masemola several times in his main autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, with considerable respect and admiration. To Mandela, Masemola was ‘an extremely talented artist and sculptor . . . he carved . . . *fantastic figures*. He constructed a bookcase for me, which I used for many years’ (2013: 466). In his brief pamphlet titled *The True History of Robben Island Must Be Preserved*, Pheko also makes a reference to this figure after enumerating his creative

practices, adding that 'one of his important creations was the sculptor of an African warrior-hunter' (2002: 37). This sculpture also emerges, again quite fleetingly, in late curator Okwui Enwezor's text 'The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation':

Photographed on Robben Island shortly after the release of the political prisoners housed there, the photograph is of a concrete sculpture made by Japhta Masemola (a founding member of the Pan Africanist Congress) of a man in underpants with a bow slung across his chest, and a dog. The sculpture depicts Robben Island's first political prisoner, the Khoikhoi chief, Autshumato, marooned on the island by the Dutch in 1658. (2004: 28)

Enwezor does not care to mention that this figure he dubs Autshumao, facing into the Atlantic seaboard, could just be any other historical captive 'poised to fly, itching to take off' (Piper 1999: 229). Or that Masemola's strategic position of his 'fantastic figure' in 'underpants' was not simply invoking this lineage of escapees but could as well be projecting himself in it, as he himself stood there, banished. Put differently, that this figure looked quite longingly and fondly at the nearby shores with prospecting warrior eyes was Masemola actively inserting himself by means of artistic surrogacy in a tradition of historical insurgency. When I asked the guards about the whereabouts of this sculpture on the island, one simply said, 'it doesn't exist anymore'. However, unlike the sculpture, the key exists or so it seems. That the key connects with the fugitive contemplations of the sculpture is something rarely invoked, if ever, even in memoirs. Their relation is only invoked as Masemola's creative objects (in general) but rarely as objects enacting the performative gesture of the political prisoner's own fugitive impulse as an anti-colonial disruption. In his autobiography, former political prisoner Gaby Mogomola talks about a *skelm* key, with reference to Masemola's master key as instantiating both creative disruption and criminality. The Afrikaans word *skelm* denotes an artful dodger or hoodlum: *tsotsi*. But a *skelm* key refers to something completely opposite this. In fact, it refers to a door locker that uses a special key to hinder intruders or burglars from breaking in. As previously mentioned, this underwrites colonial criminology as a study of black people as criminalised existence. When Mogomola uses the *skelm* key, he is, however, inverting this logic. Like

the tsotsi's potentiated power in the struggle, this epithet converts Masemola's act of 'criminality' into a sign of creative ingenuity; what above Nkosi refers to as 'freedom of action'. Even with all his abrasiveness towards Africanists, Mandela's considerate invocation of Masemola's key, uncharacteristically, seems similarly heartfelt. He writes:

Jeff Masemola, our master craftsman, had managed to make a passkey that unlocked most of the doors in and around our section. One day, a warder had left his key on the desk in the office at the end of our corridor. Jeff took a piece of soap and made an imprint of the key. Using that outline, he took a piece of metal and filed it into the shape of the key. This key gave us access to some of the storerooms behind our cells as well as to the isolation section. But we never used it to leave our section. It was the sea, after all, that was the uncrossable moat around Robben Island. (Mandela 2013: 475)

The possessive 'our' seems to signal not just Block B camaraderie but also a tacit fondness or sympathetic attachment, as alluded to before. Of course, there is a risk of assuming an over-deterministic reading here, either by overcompensating on Mandela's words or assuming the typical Africanist anti-ANC bashing that shuns the existence of the kinds of intimate and interpersonal relational across partisan boundaries. Nevertheless, Masemola's relationship with Mandela developed only when the former was moved to Block B in the early 1970s. As Mac Maharaj makes it clear, Masemola was only transferred to their section (Block B) after he was caught the first time. It was at the end of 1969 that Masemola, together with Sedick Isaacs and Anthony Suze, devised the plan to steal and clone the master key by embossing it on the bar of soap. But this was not the first time, says Isaac in a note fixed on the wall inside Masemola's cell, they had tried to formulate an escape plan. In fact, 'before turning to the idea of making a key, Japhta Masemola and myself considered other means of escape'.

Another note in the prison exhibition also enumerates these attempts, firstly that Masemola, Sedick Isaacs, and Saki Sello Mafatshe 'stole a boat and hid it'. The other one, the same note states 'involved smuggling a jack from one of the warders' cars'. Usually when these stories are told, there is always a disjuncture or a disconnect that makes them seem rather incoherent. Relying

on archival and written accounts has also meant having to piece together this puzzle of perpetually wayward narratives, told from very disparate perspectives. Consider for example that in Pheko's account, the core collective in the story involves a Vusi Nkumane, who had allegedly made an impression on a bar of soap. Sometimes Masemola is made solely responsible for everything. However, in the narrative written by Sedick Isaacs, even the bit about the soap is not mentioned. Let us quote Isaacs at length from the same wall note:

Before turning to the idea of making a key, Japhta Masemola and myself considered other means of escape. Cutting through the bars was impossible, since each prison bar had a thinner high grade steel bar mounted on ball bearings inside and outer bar which made it virtually cut proof. We first tried jacking the bars aside with a screw jack. This jack proved to be too weak. A hydraulic jack might have worked. It was my job to observe the pattern of the key the warders used. I noticed that the manufacturer of the lock was British, and concluded that the measurements were in inches. The height, depth and diameter of the ring at the top of the keyhole was carefully measured. A thirty-secondth of an inch was deducted from these measurements and the width, height and the diameter of the barrel of the key was obtained. Bra Jeff was thus able to grind the basic blank key from these dimensions. He did this very expertly since the only grinding tools he had in his blacksmith shop in the quarry were a grinding wheel and a whetstone. This basic key was brought in twice to get a good fit. Once this was complete the key came with a small supply of fat. Late in the night Anthony Suze and myself lit the fat and the blank key was held in the smoke until it was well blackened. This blackened key was then carefully inserted into the lock, strongly twisted and slowly withdrawn. The first pattern of the key was formed onto the blackened blank and measured. The pattern was drawn on paper and taken to Bra Jeff. Bra Jeff then spent two weeks grinding the first prototype of the key. The key was now brought back to Tony, expertly hidden in the search for tauza lines which all prisoners coming from the quarry must pass. That night we once more put up our table next to the cell door pretending to study. Later when everybody was asleep we inserted the key into the lock. The key turned once lifting some tumblers. To unlock the door, the key must be turned twice and only a master key can do this. We now had a day key. Unfortunately, we could not properly lock the cell door again. We spent that night desperately trying to re-lock our cell door. When morning came the cell was still unlocked and we saw the spectre of a period of starvation on spare diet in the solitary confinement cells which inevitably follow discovery. The day warder came and found the cell not properly locked.

Instead of locking he went straight to the head of the prison who came and inspected the lock and left. We were then let out and later that day we learnt that the night warder was charged with negligence. The key now was taken to Bra Jeff for further refinement.

Isaacs' account speaks with the tone of a protagonist. From their early attempts to the day they were finally fingered, their contraband apprehended, and finally, as he predicted, they ended up straight in solitary confinement. Journalist accounts of makes allusions to another spectacular turn of events, adding that when the warders burst into Masemola's cell, the authorities also found geography books with bold marks on chapters on wind directions from season to season. Other accounts point that the key was treated as *commons* in the way in which everyone was offered the chance to escape, but 'no-one took up the offer' (1987), chimed one Thami Mkwanazi. The veracity of the latter point is, of course, dubious in consideration of Maharaj's admission that he reached out to Masemola to make another key. Judging by the history of escapees who died en route to their imagined freedoms, the fear of the raft capsizing mid-flight and being engulfed by furious glacial waters, must have reopened the atavistic wounds of Makhanda and other political escapees. In the same article titled 'My Years on Robben Island', Mkwanazi mentions he was told about the key but quickly alerts us that some prisoners felt that escaping would 'retard the struggle. Any attempt at escaping could lead to a death – and only the ones to benefit would be the state' (ibid). There is also a cloud of mystery around the event of the discovery of the plot, which is contradictory all round. Whilst in a number of narratives it is alluded that it was a common law criminal who reported Masemola, Isaac and Suze; Black consciousness activist Dr Saths Cooper is cited by Smith to have alleged that 'an *impimpi*, or an informer – a fellow Pan Africanist – had revealed the plan' (1997: 42). Be that as it may, the backstory to Masemola's key shows a familial resilience that, but a close study of it also demonstrates a creative proclivity.

The Key and the Azanian Tradition

If the prerogative of black radicalism is, as Robinson argues, predicated on 'the impulse to make history in their own terms' (2000:

170) by that meaning to undercut the very impositions and semantic categories in which white supremacy establishes its domination over the enslaved and colonised blacks, then in what ways can we locate the key within the ideological tendencies of the Azanian tradition? The Azanian school is a black nationalist orientation whose separatist antecedents have influenced early black political and theological formations, including cultural practices, in South Africa, and later, particularly in the mid-20th century, culminated into the formation of PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), respectively. Thus, to truly understand and locate the theory and praxis of the Azanian school today, and therefore of Masemola's key, Dladla asks us to note that the:

common factors which unite the organisations which are characterised as belonging to this school are the emphasis on African culture (*isintu*) as the basis of liberation politics. Also included is the incredulity held by the adherents to the 'liberatory' nature of the 1994 'negotiated settlement'. (2017: 57, footnote)

In the following remarks we will outline exactly these two points. What is African culture qua Black culture today and why does it relate to the key? For Burkinabe historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, 'Africa is no longer the Africa of the Dogons: Africa is not a museum! It is a dough in full ferment' (1962: 268). Similarly, Steve Biko was critical of the conception of African culture as 'time-bound' arguing that, 'I am also against the belief that when one talks of African culture one is necessarily talking of the pre-Van Riebeeck culture' (2009: 45). In both instances, what is meant by African culture is neither a recourse to a recuperatory romanticism about things frozen in time and space, nor is it about structurally adjusting to the prevailing logics of the dominant order. Instead, African culture is a dynamic, but ethical, inheritance born out of what Cabral calls 'the humus of the material reality of the environment in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors' (2012: 173). Consequently, as a political and epistemological tendency which grows out of this 'dough in full ferment', black radicalism not only deciphers but also seeks to abolish the prevailing colonial worldview and system, which readily constructs Africa as an ontologically insular and culturally vacuous entity (Hegel 2001: 109).

This is not to claim that African modernity was, unproblematically, a progressive tendency, pure and simple. If anything, the social life of blackness in an anti-black world is always already structured ambivalently. It is a trajectory formed at the intersection of antagonistic imaginaries, operating contemporaneously. ‘Modern African culture’ Biko maintained, straddled between indigenous knowledge and, ‘a culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics’ (2009: 50). In terms of its cultural thought and production within the BCM, philosopher Percy More adds that the ‘near absence of an explicitly home-grown’ (2014: 190) philosophical and cultural orientation, is predicated in the ‘inter-textually embedded discursive practice’ (ibid.: 191). The Pan-Africanization of anti-colonial struggle that, in and outside of settler colonial South Africa, engendered a blackened subjectivity that transformed the very idea of home or homeland to one ‘no longer responsive to the call of the tribe’ (Ngubane 1963: 69). Important to repeat here is that, though modernisation came as a result of colonial imposition, it should not be assumed that the dynamic character of Black modern culture interrupted a spatially and temporally static ground. In fact, through his notion of a ‘philo-praxis of liberation’, Dladla has articulated how the Africanist liberatory praxis extracts from traditional thought epistemological structures that are always in a ‘constant state of revision, reconfiguration’ (2017: 52). ‘This conceptual emancipation of modernity from the clutches of Europe’s narcissism allows us to undercut teleological propulsion and to more vigorously interrogate what are the constitutive features of modernity in art without necessarily treating Europe as the model’ (Nzegwu 1998: 7). That is why culture as Mbulelo Mzamane argues, was understood within the broader BCM, ‘not a static or even a necessarily coherent phenomenon but . . . subject to change, fragmentation and reformulation’ (1992: 193).

It is through this perspective that I consider Masemola’s key as a material manifestation and embodiment of Azanian thought and praxis. Taken within the context of their operation, what Masemola and his colleagues did, in the first instance, arguably contradicts feminist thinker Audre Lorde’s famous assertion that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. Lorde’s axiom, which has now become synonymous with subaltern studies, warns

against the seductions of Eurocentric paradigms of thought. This incredulity towards the master's tools is held out as her recognition of the limitations and deceitful nature of the master's benevolence and on the principle that his tools were, in the first place, not supposed to work to the masters' detriment. Lorde writes that 'they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (1996: 112). However, Lewis and Jane-Anne Gordon have contested this by stating that 'slaves have historically done something more provocative with such tools than attempt to dismantle the Big House' (2016: ix). Indeed, Masemola's act, in part, recalls those acts of bravery among oppressed, excluded, and captive communities who used tools intended for their subjection to institute different modes of inquiry. In other words, Masemola's use or procedure towards cloning the prison key is substantively different to Lorde's presumption on how the master's discursive tools proceed because he is not enabled by the master. Instead, he uses deceptive methods and means almost akin to those of *tsotsi*. The end of the point is very clear: 'When enough houses are built, the hegemony of the master's house – in fact, *mastery itself* – will cease to maintain its imperial status' (Gordon and Gordon 2016: ix).

However, in the second instance, Masemola's key is also motivated by two other interrelated thoughts: (1) 'we black people should all the time keep in mind that South Africa is our country and that all of it belongs to us' (Biko 2009: 95); and (2) 'true democracy can only be established in South Africa and on the continent as a whole, only when white supremacy has been destroyed' (Sobukwe 1978: 23). The colonial master qua settler's alleged tools for his alleged house were not only used and built unjustly, they were also not his to begin with. His right to build depended and still depends on the relational structures of racial domination; on the exploitation of the cheapened labours of the oppressed and, most importantly, the total disregard and dispensability of the human life of the people of African descent. In other words, what often escapes the presumption that subtends Lorde's petition is that the so-called master's tools logic disavows that the master, a posteriori, positions 'the black is the apogee of the commodity' (Farley 2004: 1229).

As such Masemola's project instantiates a subversion, whose operation depends on a set of unsanctioned and transgressive

practices deliberately deranging the authority of the penal and the colonial-apartheid system. As a creative device, its toolness can or should be differentiated from the old materialist injunction of 'art as a tool' or even its opposite, aesthetic formalism. It is also not a tool or object in the sense of Marcel Duchamp's famous readymades. It resides in an interstitial nowhere, as an object or even idea without a proper place, and always already hidden, smuggled, and slipping away. However, this placelessness cannot mean without a part or purpose in a generalised sense. If anything, its part and purpose arises out of the need to constantly delink, derange, and eventually destroy the very conceptual apparatuses through which racists civilisations rest. Therefore, considering the epistemic boundedness of the dominant cultural discourse to the dominant order, one can hardly be bothered by Masemola's conspicuous absence in art historical and aesthetic disciplinary thought. After all, by its very nature, Masemola's key reluctantly operates above board. Taking the cue from theorist Christina Sharpe, who has cautioned we who 'are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation' to 'become undisciplined' (2016: 40) the errant nature of Masemola's key beckons us to slip away.

Given that there are clearly many versions of the key, how do we even know which is Masemola's first and last or, worse, if they actually still exist today? Is this differentiation necessary if what is of necessity remains the key's performative power rather than its visual materiality, presence? Let me make another reference to African culture, as a philo-praxis of liberation, might be helpful in thinking with and from. African philosopher Olabiyi J. Yai makes the cautionary point that 'we cannot hope *to do justice* to Yoruba art and art history unless we are prepared to re-examine, question, and indeed abandon certain attitudes, assumptions, and concepts of our various disciplines, however foundational they may appear to us, and consequently take seriously indigenous discourses on art and art history' (1993: 107). By doing justice to Yoruba art, Yai points us to the concept of *oriki*, whose generativity is grounded on a certain fugitive impulse, or 'constant departure' from the norm, as a mode of paradoxically engaging with it. In this sense, unlike Western artistic thought and expression fixed to the simulacra, 'Yoruba worldview, artistic practice, and discourse, the best way to recognize reality and artistically relate to it is to depart from it. An entity

or reality worth respecting is that from which we depart or differ' (113). 'Art', by which Yai means the art of Yoruba people, which can easily be of black Africa and diaspora more generally, 'is an invitation to infinite metonymy, difference, and departure, and not a summation for sameness and imitation' (35). There are countless examples of this kind of orientation in African arts and cultures in form and conceptually. But Masemola's key is not, by virtue of its mundane appearance properly an artistic object, and does not aspire to being one. Yet we can say that the idiom of escape is pervasive in Masemola's works. Even when we look back into Masemola's sculpture of the fantastic figure, which now we can only remember posthumously as it were, fugitivity is also anticipated, intimated. As such *oriki* provides the best way of understanding Masemola's key, not necessarily as art but as an object that at all costs consistently departs or escapes from various categorisations. And perhaps more complicated than a typical object of *oriki*, functions properly as hidden from the stewardship of those in power. Like all contraband, the key equally takes on a performative but also reproductive role, simply by virtue of its elusive demeanour.

Towards a Conclusion

In "“Smuggling” – An Embodied Criticality', art theorist Irit Rogoff points out that smuggling of contrabands entails a practice of critical anonymity, which obscures the object's identity. Rogoff is 'not trying to illustrate smuggling through various works of art but to produce it as an operational device which allows us to bring our speculations concerning global circulations, cultural difference, translations, legitimacies, secure inhabitation, visibility and the queering of identity into play as they circle and hopefully produce “smuggling” as a new subject in the world' (2008: 6). Critical though in Rogoff's notion of smuggling is not only a surreptitious, if clandestine, operation but also collaborative enterprise. Interestingly, our turn to African culture's anonymous characteristic – whether immanent or imposed – becomes critical in our attempt to conjure Masemola's key.

'One of the most striking features about African art is its anonymity,' says Pallo Jordan, because 'no works are inscribed with

names of their creators' (Jordan 2004: 12). In this sense, anonymity instantiates communal access and ownership. This is not to say Masemola's key should be read as African art, at least not intentionally. With that said, Masemola's key shares much with African cultural practices than we would care to acknowledge. But with a discerning mind, it might even be more reasonable to draw parallels between the key and the avant-garde tradition without needing to invoke African culture. A more scrupulous take, however, would, without fear of contradiction, concede to the unacknowledged and marginalised place of African art as critical stimuli in much of twentieth-century western culture, the avant-garde included.

Following the transindividual feature in this work is its performative transmediality. Attempts at trying to re-apprehend or fully attend to it through discursive formations within the creative fields might encounter a deadlock – aphasia – as the key, to a great extent, functions more like mythic allegory than something we can bring to bear in contemporary art discourse. Poetically, the coming into being of the key through a replicatory process from the master key, via a piece of soap and into the *skelm* key, is reminiscent of what theatre historian Joseph Roach calls *surrogation*. That is, a process that 'does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric' (1996: 2). Even though, politically, the reproduction, cloning, and copying of the key, contextually, might function as a metonym for radicalism, there is also something banal about it. That is, the banality of the process of cutting keys as a typical artisanal vocation. This, of course, extends to other technologies of reproduction in creative fields, such as photography, pressing a record, and even printing books, whose social function had democratised visual, sonic, and literary culture to the general population previously enjoyed by an elite few. Though largely speaking in terms of form and medium, Wynter kind of makes an interesting point on the specific functionality of the novel:

The novel form reflects his [artist] critical and oppositional stance to a process of alienation which began to fragment the very human community, without which the writer has neither purpose, nor source material nor view of the world nor audience. The novel form, a product of the market economy, its exchange structure, its individual here is set free to realize his individuality by the liberal values of individualism, linked

to the very existence of the market system, nevertheless, instead of expressing the values of the market society, develops and expands as a form of resistance to this market society. (1971: 97)

Reproduction has been central to most twentieth-century art since at least the emergence of the avant-garde, reaching its height with the advent of appropriation art in the 1980s and even relational art thereafter. These interventions have stressed how artistic and productive labour affect each other or, better still, emphasised a relation between art and life. For the avant-garde, 'the object still retains its material and phenomenological form, but because it is no longer just an object of productive labour, it exists as other to itself, and therefore could be said to be a replication of its original form' (Roberts 2007: 54). That the original 'exists as other to itself' suggests a measured apposition between critical art and Masemola's key. Whereas in Masemola's key, unlike the avant-garde readymades for instance, the material, and phenomenological and even the purposive end of the object are all the same. In this whole process, the transpositional role engendered by the soap, can easily go without notice. The soap, as some kind of strange middle passage, plays the role of an intermediary space. Although a fleeting embodiment, the transposition of the soap to the key, instantiates what Rogoff calls a 'surreptitious transfer' or 'the passage of the contraband' (2008: 6). As part of daily miscellany, its intermediary role easily gets overlooked in the process. But as feminist thinker Anne McClintock has shown, the soap, as a commodity, has a social history that tends to be easily disregarded because of its quotidianness (1995: 209). It was after all, commonplace in the apartheid jails for anti-apartheid artists like Pitika Ntuli and Masemola, to make creative use of daily miscellany such as keys, bread and even soap – turning them into art.

Under apartheid, the soap also functioned as the Security Police's ersatz to conceal the brutal murdering of many activists; they would say, 'while in the prison lavatory, prisoner X slipped on the soap and hit his head and died'. But Masemola's repurposing of the soap into a resistance weapon negates its intentions. Just like the key, he empties the sheer contingency of their imposed inscriptions and opens them up to a different possibility. Unlike the highly technical escape plan of the Pretoria Central Prison led by ANC cadreship of Tim Jenkins and his ilk in the late 1970s, Masemola's key is put

together meagrely, and with seeming effortlessness but makes it no less effective. The miscellaneous media employed by Masemola in the realisation of his key itself, as said, share much with the radical tendencies of modern and contemporary art. Unfortunately, Masemola's key – famous as it is in the liberation movement accounts – has remained both legend and misnomer. Unlike Jenkins' now iconised narrative of escape, Masemola's life story of bravery and creativity has been virtually kept as a well-known secret within the archival revisitations of anti-apartheid history. And yet, it is this nominal and fungible status that I personally find generative and reproductive enough for us to think beyond South African expression, towards Azanian aesthetics. Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image as instantiation of reproducibility in the context can shed some light on the potentiality of Masemola's key as an object of repressed capacity. She opens her essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image' by saying:

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into channels of distribution. (2012: 32)

The generic disposition of the poor image, recalls the same generic itinerancy of the key as a reproducible object or what she calls 'an illicit fifth generation bastard of an original image' (*ibid.*). It is neither a stable image nor a necessarily progressive one. But it is its openness and ability to reconstitute itself in every situation that fascinates me here: 'By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original", but on the transience of the copy' (42). I am also interested in how Steyerl's concept of the poor image enacts Masemola's key simply in the way in which it lacks stable ground of artistic integrity or its intentional codes but nevertheless calls its bluff, in several ways. The poor image, like the key, only becomes proximate to art and aesthetic discourse, as an embodiment of a sensibility that can only be attributed toward a marking of a revolutionary sociality. A breaching of standards in so far as those standards are logical aggregates

of the dominant episteme. Poet and scholar Fred Moten's notion of 'animateriality' might be instructive here in how to think about the hidden transmissions of value in objects in the making of a black radical tradition (2003: 18). Elsewhere, rather abstractly, he insists, 'this becoming-object of the object . . . is (black) performance . . . the ongoing reproduction of the radical tradition . . . the black proletarianization of the bourgeois form' (2017: 33).

Therefore, the key operates as what political theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva might call a 'confrontational device', or 'hacking' object. I must say from the outset that this does not draw a direct comparison between da Silva's hacking black female flesh and the key per se – in an object-to-object relation – even though da Silva herself describes the black female as 'key to the determination of (black) racial identity' (2018: 24). In her essay, 'Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal Beyond the Limits of Critique', da Silva positions the black female as a disruptive force that not only embodies a black radical potentiality but because of that potentiality hacks the '*arche*-form' a.k.a. the symbolic and ontological constitution of the modern subject. She describes this form: 'an image, it is a shape, a mold: that is, it is an assemblage as well as a rule or a formula; as a historical artifact, it is the form of juridical power, which provides (material and formal) support for the legal figures of the citizen and the state' (2018: 26). She further writes that, therefore, 'hacking here is de\composition, or a radical transformation (or imaging) that exposes, unsettles, and perverts form and formulae' (27). For the prison warder, the key is a juridical and carceral instrument. It enforces the superiority of the law. For Masemola and his comrades, the same key, or rather its reproduction, became an instrument of subversion, of disobeying the law or instituting an alternative jurisprudence predicated on obliterating the colonial structure. What is hacked is this historical artefact/ juridical power albeit not to make it positive or sanctify the object per se into something other than it being a means to an end. Inside the penal site, we could therefore say, the key aimed at disrupting the disciplinary normalisation by opening up the possibility for oppositional and clandestine channels of the imprisoned subjects' communication, smuggling and of flight.

Gerald Raunig's concept of 'instituent practices' also comes to mind here. By this he means forms of transgressing through flight.

This fleeing of reigning institutional powers that Raunig describes as ‘escaping the arts of governing’ and the ‘new non-escapist terms of escape’ (2009: 6) is one of the functions of hacking. The difference lies in the fact that hacking, however, is not, at all, an attempt at redeeming the institution *à la* Raunig, so they persist in their old ways under a different guise. It is a thorough intrusion into the system’s metabolic regulatory order not as an outsider hacking but as part of the machinery of objects within the penal system. That animation of materiality or cargo, from its purportedly original position as commodity, is a form of hacking, or an abstraction even, that institutes an inclination for what in the parlance aesthetic discourse is tantamount to autonomy. In liberation politics, it is akin to a flight to freedom. That is why Masemola and his colleagues were set on one thing and one thing only: to escape imprisonment in all its manifestations, in and out of the island. Let us read one more time from Isaac’s wall inscription:

The day I found myself in prison I made the resolution to resist imprisonment, to continually endeavor to escape and resist with all my strength the possible adverse effect of imprisonment. The incident of making a master key to the cells of Robben Island must have been my fifth attempt to escape.

But, when in the mid-1980s Masemola and other political prisoners serving long-time were promised to be released by then apartheid president P. W. Botha on condition that they denounced his earlier commitments to violence, Masemola rejected those conditions. Some newspaper reports quote Masemola to have said, ‘his incarceration was insignificant compared to the oppression under which his people live’. If flight is never fixed in the position of whence it came but where it is going, there’s also a need to refuse or even disrupt the tacit assumption that tends to unilaterally conflate flight with freedom (Sexton 2016). Or even separate bondage from freedom? If anything, ‘The ghetto and the gulag do not disappear when one announces an age of freedom’ (Jamal 2005: 15). When Masemola refused Botha’s bail conditions he was speaking to two tenets presupposed by the condition of that bail. First, that he did not consider himself to have committed any criminal act that warranted him to apologise or renounce his actions. Secondly, he refused, from earlier on, the dialogical possibility between coloniser and colonised

set in the table or context inevitably prepared for the welfare of whites. Consequently, by this conviction, he rejected the negotiations as a political circus organised by the ANC whose 'middlemen' standpoint had, in 1955, already acquiesced to the disavowal of the settler colonial debt. That is why, as Ike Mafole writes, soon after his sentence ended he 'travelled the length and breadth of the country reviving PAC structures' (2010). For Masemola, in the first place, being out of prison, much like being 'out' of poverty, under terms set by a remaining colonising class was not freedom.

The fugitive articulations of the Azanian school begin with the assertion that 'South Africa is a product of imperialism, colonialism, foreign occupation, and rule by a minority of European settlers' (Pheko 1992: 1). These black fugitive practices, in and beyond the walls of Robben Island, do not only pervade black political praxis; according to Mackey, 'fugitivity asserts itself at the aesthetic level' (2005: 187). For Mackey, this 'fugitive spirit' which he describes as an 'obliquity of an unbounded reference' displays errantry, or that 'wants out' from the proposed or even imposed (2018: 187), is what I have been trying to elaborate on, with regards to Masemola's master key. It is a restless deviation from the norm, an endless interruption of the structures of domination and conquest. And as literary scholar Ronald Judy writes, 'Political failure does not mean, however, the flight's end' (2020: 92). Masemola's life and work exemplified this perennial flight from and rejection of conqueror South Africa, not necessarily based on the falsity of claims to prepare for 'free and united' (Sachs 1990: 19) dispensation but the actual existence of the South Africa polity as such. That is, as an existence that is inherently parasitic and historically problematic for black liberation.

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Notes

1. Azania refers to a name first adopted by the Pan Africanist Movement (PAC) for South Africa.

2. See specifically Nelson Mandela's reflection on Azania in 'Whither the Black Consciousness Movement: An Assessment' in *Reflections in Prison* edited by Mac Maharaj.
3. Here I am thinking of the ongoing artworks by performance artist Athi Patra Ruga which invokes Azania, and the subsequent reflections about it in various publications. See the essays in Patra-Ruga's catalogue titled F.W.W.O.A. SAGA (2014). On the other side, I am thinking about how Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) uses Azania in various contexts, as in its consistent use of the PAC's struggle song Azania – when politically the party also defends and ideologically abide by the ANC's freedom charter and the liberal constitution, which stand diametrically opposite to what the song and the Africanists school stands for. Secondly, the deputy leader of the EFF, Floyd Shivambu's company, Grand Azania, has been recently fingered for looting the VBS Mutual Bank, in a way that has left poor black families in misery.
4. More, M. P. 2006. 'Albert Luthuli, Steve Biko, and Nelson Mandela: The Philosophical Basis of their Thought and Practice'. In K. Wiredu (ed) *A Companion to African Philosophy*.
5. Ibid.
6. Black First Land First (BLF), which is a Black Consciousness-inspired radical movement, has been taken to court by various organizations, led by the right-wing white formation *Afriforum*, over the slogan 'Land or Death'. BLF thinks of itself as part of that long trajectory of Africanist praxis which gave birth to the PAC and BCM and uses this slogan to reinvigorate the traditions primary ideological principle, to fight for the attainment of black indigenous people's land from white foreign domination.
7. Although Masemola comes from the pre-scientific socialist turn in the exile PAC, the nickname 'The Tiger of Azania' is said to be taken from an expression made in an interview Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong about how the Chinese people are not afraid of the American atom because they were 'paper tigers'. Masemola projected the apartheid state as a paper tiger, and thus not terrified by it. In the end, the nickname ends up turning Masemola into a paper tiger himself, and Azania too because it politically and logically sounds like a contradiction the PAC's position (of Masemola's era) which opted to take the position of 'positive neutrality' in the cold war.
8. In her book *Robben Island*, journalist Charlene Smith captures this: 'In September 1989, P.W. Botha, who had become increasingly erratic and an embarrassment to the National Party, lost in elections to a hitherto undistinguished parliamentarian, Frederick William de Klerk. 'Between October 9 and 10, they came to us and said we will release seven of you, including Motsoaledi who was still on the Island. Mandela asked, "What about Jeff Masemola?" They said he is a PAC person. But, Mandela said, "He has been in longer than us". They said they would consider it' (1997: 76). Masemola was released together with notable ANC prisoners who had been serving a long time, namely Raymond Mhlaba, Ahmed Kathrada, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, Wilton Mkwayi, and Oscar Mpetsha.
9. This refers to a house within the Victor Verster prison premises where Nelson Mandela was given a warder's house and spent the last few years of his twenty-seven-year prison sentence. This is where he met Masemola who was flown all the way from a Johannesburg prison before he was finally released in 1989.
10. The quotation marks on the "cultural work" seek to underline or place emphasis on the troubling history of the concept, whose historical genealogy I have critiqued elsewhere. See, Joja, A.M. 2021. 'About-race: A Critical Appraisal of the Concept Cultural Work'. In I.J. Mhlambi and S. Ngidi (ed) *Mintirho Ya Vulavula: Arts, National Identities and Democracy in South Africa*.
11. See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF-wD2WMIDI&t=93s>

12. Masemola, who had been later transferred to Mandela's famous Block B in the early 1970s, had collaborated with his block mates in hatching yet again other plans for escape, smuggling, and making life slightly easier than expected.

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